



Counting Peasants: The 1660 Danish Tax Census

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16 January 2023

History

Denmark was originally divided into three main regions: Jylland (Jutland), Sjælland (Zealand), and Skåne (Scania). Denmark was the wealthiest Nordic country and a substantial country on the world stage even if it was never a major power like England, France, or Spain at least until the end of the thirty years war. The thirty years war broke out in 1618 and King Christian IV chose to intervene from 1625 until 1629. Christian suffered heavy losses and his kingdom was weakened as a result. King Gustavus Adolphus then brought Sweden into the war from 1630 until 1635. Gustavus was a brilliant military commander and Sweden was much more successful than Denmark had been and Sweden was strengthened.

In 1645, Sweden recognized the opportunity to gain land at Denmark's expense and started the Torstensson war. They won the war and took Gotland, Øsel, and Jämtland and the province of Halland was mortgaged to Sweden for 30 years.

In 1657, King Carl X of Sweden was away at war in Poland. King Frederik III of Denmark saw the opportunity to recover some of their losses from the Torstensson war and chose to attack Sweden's new possessions in Germany. Carl X was pleased to have an excuse to leave the Polish war and subsequently marched his army from Poland into the Jylland peninsula. This was during part of the coldest years of the Little Ice Age. In January, it became so cold that the Swedish army was able to march across the ice from Jylland, across the islands, and up to Roskilde. At the resulting peace treaty (8 March 1658 Treaty of Roskilde), Denmark was forced to cede all of its land east of Øresund to Sweden, Denmark was forbidden from ever entering into an anti-Swedish alliance, and was forbidden from charging Sweden tolls for crossing Øresund.

Carl X decided this was not good enough and on 17 July 1658 he launched a surprise attack on Copenhagen with the goal of wiping Denmark off the map completely. Frederik personally led the defense of Copenhagen for 22 months saying, "I would sooner die in my nest" than lose his kingdom. Frederik became popular among the people for his valiant defense of Copenhagen while the nobility, who had been complacent at best, treasonous at worst became hated. Eventually, the Dutch broke the siege, Carl X died from being in the cold too much and the war ended 27 May 1660. Denmark-Norway regained Trøndelag and Bornholm but not Scania.

This sets the stage for the 1660 tax census. After two wars in three years, Frederik was 5 million rigsdaler in debt and the country was vulnerable and in ruins. Frederik declared a state of emergency and at the resulting meetings. Frederik was now popular enough and the nobility

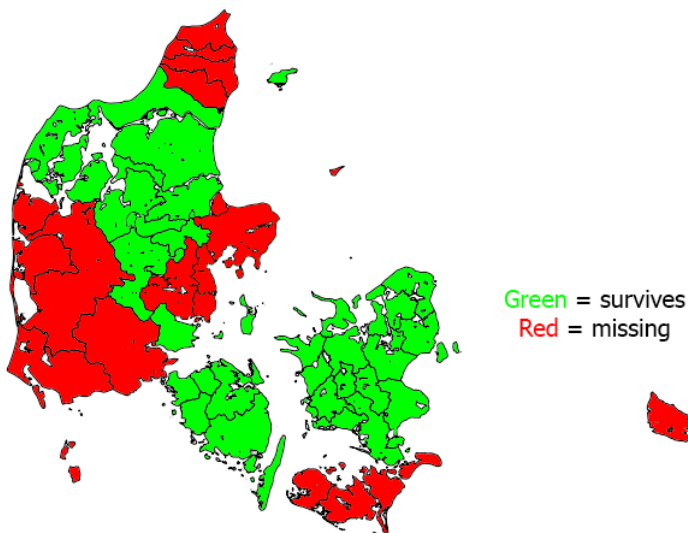
unpopular enough that starting in October martial law was enforced and Frederik became an absolute monarch. Then in November an emergency poll tax was levied. Each person above the age of 10-12 was required to pay 1 rigsdaler.

Based on the surviving records, some have estimated that the population of Denmark in 1660 was only 410,000-430,000 people.¹ By contrast, England is estimated to have had 4,110,000 people in 1660, ten times the amount. The amount collected from the tax was not enough to pay the full debt and Denmark initiated many more extra taxes all the way until 1700.

Most of those other taxes were microfilmed by FamilySearch long ago. For information on how to use those, see the class, Danish Tax Records.² But because the 1660 tax census was taken during martial law and collected by the military, this census was initially off the radar and missed. It just last year it was digitized and can now be viewed on FamilySearch.org.

Coverage

The 1660 Census of Peasants



Initially the whole kingdom except Schleswig-Holstein and Bornholm paid the tax, but parts of it have been lost. To the left is a map. The red areas are missing and the green are still intact.

One exception to this is the city of Nakskov located on the east coast of Lolland. The tax census survived there. If your ancestors are from Lolland then you are in luck because Nakskov in addition to having this tax, has parish records back to 1577. You should use both to extend your ancestry as far as possible.

Organization

The tax is organized by *len* (province), *herred* (district), and then *sogn* (parish). The provinces were replaced by *amter* (counties) in 1662. The purpose of changing them was to strip the

¹ Aksel Lassen, *The population of Denmark, 1660–1960*; Scandinavian Economic History Review, 14:2, 134-157, DOI: 10.1080/03585522.1966.10407652 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03585522.1966.10407652>; accessed 14 January 2023).

² <https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/lessons/denmark-tax-records-1660-1812>

nobility of some of their privileges so the *len* and the *amter* mostly have the same boundaries. (There were a few small *len* like Jungshoved that were merged with the neighbouring *len*). However, in from 1793 to 1808 most of the *amter* were combined to create larger ones. Many researchers only think of those newer boundaries when thinking of the *amter*. To find your ancestor in this tax census you need to know what the original boundaries were. The quality of the genealogical information varies. In the worst cases, only the head of household was named and the total amount of people was given. Most of Vordingborg *len* is this way except for one estate where slightly more information is given. Still this is useful for seeing what men with the right name were present that could be your ancestor. Other times the head of household was named and then the relationships but not names were given for everyone else. This is a little better as you can see if there is a son or daughter in the home that could be your ancestor. In the best cases, everyone who owed the tax is named and their relationship to the head of household is given. All of Skivehus *len* is this way. If your ancestor lived in Skivehus you definitely need to check out this tax list.

How to Access

The tax list is available for free from FamilySearch.org but it is only available through FamilySearch images, it is not in the traditional catalog. Originally this tax list was hard to find because it was listed under military records and was organized weird. Specifically it was organized by diocese but the cities of Copenhagen and Nakskov were separate. I recataloged it as a “tax census” and redivided it so each *len* could be a separate area. When I did this, the *len* were not an option to choose in the metadata system so I chose the county boundaries that existed in 1662 which are mostly the same. The main difference is Jungshoved *len* which I have sorted under Vordingborg county. I also made it searchable by the 1793-1970 boundaries since many people are used to searching by those boundaries. It was not viable to break down the images so that it was searchable by the exact parish, but you should never have to search through more than about 90 images to find the parish you want.

1. Go to FamilySearch images <https://www.familysearch.org/records/images/>
2. Click “Show More Search Options” and then click “Show Advanced Search”
3. In the “Place” bar type in Denmark, [the name of the county]³, in the “Date” bar type in 1660 and in the “Record Type” bar type in “Tax Census”
4. Click “Search Image Groups”
5. Click on the image sets that come up and then search through the images until you find your parish. Usually the parish’s name is easy to find at the top.

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³ You can use either the county that existed from 1662 until 1793 or the 1793 until 1970 one, but if you choose the latter option you may have two or three collections you need to check.